An address to:

THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
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CHILDREN OF MINOR WIVES

Given by:

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CHILDREN OF MINOR WIVES

Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, as an individual, and as the former President of the National Federation of the Blind, has given, and continues to give effective leadership to your movement. His commitment to the objectives of your organization is respected throughout your country and internationally. President Marc Maurer, the officers and you the membership, must build on Dr. Jernigan's leadership. The National Federation of the Blind is a formidable resource that can continue to give life and meaning to shape a better world for people who, on a daily basis, must contend with blindness or poor vision.

It is due to my respect for Dr. Jernigan and to the value that he places on the quality of life for blind persons, that I was pleased to accept his invitation to address your 1988 convention here in Chicago. An unfortunate conflict in my own schedule makes it impossible for me to be here for the remainder of this week, but you may be certain that I will be most interested in the outcome of your deliberations and in the priorities and plans that you will develop for the coming year and beyond.

Throughout my career, I have had to write numerous letters, articles, and addresses such as this one. I have never written a book, but I understand that usually when a book has been completed the author and the publisher sit down and debate over the title of the book. My approach is usually to start with the title and then try to convey my thoughts and message. It was on that basis that some months ago I indicated to Dr. Jernigan that my presentation to this convention would have the title "Children of Minor Wives".

To understand my choice of that title you would have to travel with me to Thailand to meet Aurora, a blind woman and mother of two teenage children. In March of this year, I was in that country to learn more about the work of Helen Keller International, and to review a Canadian International Development Agency project to train eye surgeons. During a reception and dinner aboard a rice boat on the river in Bangkok, I had a long conversation with Aurora about the quality of life for blind persons and the struggle for full participation and equality in our society, whether in Bangkok, Chicago, or elsewhere. We spoke of differing cultures, religions, and traditions. It was in that sphere of reference that Aurora equated the status of blind people as equal to the children of minor wives. From her description, it was my understanding that her reference was to certain cultures where a polygamous marriage meant that the children of the primary wife received priority or

privileged status in the home, in education, and other opportunities. The children of the other/or "minor" wives were secondary in those opportunities and their entitlement to them.

That evening, the conversation caused me to reflect on the progress that we as blind people have achieved in the past two centuries and in recent years. At the same time, it accurately described the secondary status that too many blind people still occupy in 1988. We, as blind people, are part of society and so part of the family, and to that extent we have achieved some measure of comfort and security. On closer examination, we discover that to be full and equal participants in the family we must achieve a higher status by becoming the children of the "primary" wife. The single and most important difference is that unlike the children born to minor wives, we have the freedom and the opportunity to exercise a mobility toward that higher status.

The first, and most significant step for blind people seeking equality, was a formulation of the alphabet by Louis Braille that would tear back the curtain of illiteracy and darkness. Writing in 1930, Helen Keller expressed it best: "Books are the eyes of the blind. They reveal to us the glories of the light-filled world. They keep us in touch with what people are thinking and doing. They help us to forget our limitations".

As the 20th century draws to a close, blind persons have attained freer access to education and gainful employment in an independent and competitive environment. At the same time, we have discovered that the laws of the nation, written and democratically sanctioned, must be changed or declared unjust unless they are applicable to the majority of citizens. As an integral part of the new Canadian constitution, the Charter of Rights contains a specific provision with reference to Canadians with disabilities. This is a complex piece of legislation without precedence in our country and there will need to be numerous challenges and rulings before the courts in order to fully clarify its application and benefit to disabled persons. It is in this broader societal context that all of us are working to achieve that security and equal status. In your country, the National Federation of the Blind is an impressive force toward the achievement of these twin objectives. In Canada, the approach has differed considerably, given the stature of The Canadian National Institute for the Blind as a single national service organization that in this, its 70th year, has had an influence both in advocacy and in service delivery.

In early years the Canadian National Institute for the Blind operated a dozen sheltered workshops and over twenty residences and, thus, became a major employer of blind Canadians. Today, only four workshops remain in Ontario; and five residences in Ontario and Newfoundland. These facilities and services have been phased out over the past decade in favour of community based rehabilitation programs. With fifty-two offices in every part of Canada, including the North West Territories, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind employs 2,200 persons and there are just under 60,000 Canadians who have voluntarily registered with our agency. In 1985, we adopted the Sight Enhancement Enterprise (SEE Policy) with the effect that we now serve anyone with poor or failing vision. At the same time, the policy was careful to enunciate that those persons without sight or with very limited vision are the individuals whom we serve first and always.

In more recent years, "the consumer movement" as you would understand it in the United States, has accepted the challenge to represent blind and visually impaired Canadians in dealing with major concerns that would be similar, if not identical, to your own. In recent years, as I have travelled to a few other countries and have networked with other individuals in this field, I have discovered that organizations of blind persons are emerging and having an unprecedented influence in policy formation, service delivery and self-determination.

It is not necessary, in front of this audience, to enumerate what those challenges and priorities are. You will have read in the Braille Monitor, a letter written by me concerning my own discriminatory experience with Air Canada. That incident is illustrative of remedial efforts which we, in Canada, are making to achieve equality in access to transportation in our country. With reference to education, children in Canada are, for the most part, integrated into the regular school system within their own community. Only two schools for the blind are operating in our country. However, the integrated approach to education can only succeed if the environment truly provides for equal opportunity; that would include such requirements as adequate instruction in braille for example. Employment equity is a Federal statute in Canada but has limited applicability and more is required in that important area. Communications and access to information is a major priority and, unlike your service structure through the Library of Congress, there is no effective central leadership in our country other than what The Canadian National Institute for the Blind is able to provide through our National Library Division. In truth, we rely heavily on resources from your country for both braille and talking books and magazines.

You will conclude from these observations that we, in Canada, share in your objectives toward equality and full participation. We can and do learn from one another, a victory won in one country can have a profound influence on another. As an example, the world's first franking privilege for blind persons was introduced in Canada in 1898.

My second and somewhat different challenge today might surprise you. For me, there is the major concern related to the generic approach to disability. At a ceremony in Beijing, China, during the week of March 14th, a National Committee was established to place various disability groups under one umbrella. A similar consumer organizational structure exists in our country, although they would acknowledge that they do not adequately represent the needs of blind, deaf-blind, and visually impaired Canadians. I am certain that this approach has been repeated in other parts of the world led by Disabled Persons International (DPI), who are determined to become the international umbrella organization, seeking to speak for and represent all disabilities. We cannot allow that to happen.

To emphasize the depth of my concern, I would refer you to the April 1988 issue of the Braille Monitor, in particular, to two significant articles. The first reference is an article entitled "Bill would merge agencies for handicapped". The following introductory comment summarizes my point:

> "E. U. Parker, one of the long time leaders of the National Federation of the Blind of Mississippi, sent us the following article. It appeared in the February 4, 1988, Clarion - Ledger. As will be quickly apparent, there is nothing new or constructive in the proposed Bill discussed in this article. Despite the claims of its sponsor, the legislation would not result in savings, less confusion, or co-ordination of services. It would (as experience has repeatedly shown) achieve the opposite."

In the same issue of the Monitor you will have read, no doubt with considerable interest, of the news releases concerning the lottery program operated by the Blind Spanish Organization identified as "ONCE". In this article, we find that issues among disabled groups have gone beyond rhetoric or the niceties of the board room table. We read of "riot police", called in to control demonstrations by disabled persons, petitions to the government, and the compromise that "ONCE" brought in by including a sizeable group of disabled persons to resolve the problems in employment and profits relating to the sale of lotteries. It will be interesting to follow these developments, particularly should the non-blind

disabled contingent within "ONCE" become the voting majority. Perhaps they have considered this. In any event, this development underlines the problems that can be anticipated to occur as blind persons seek independence and equality, possibly not only within the dominant society, but as members of a numerically larger group in the generic disabled community. While it is not my intention to dramatize the issue to describe it as "the enemy within", I want to recommend that any collaborative action with cross disability organizations, where this is considered desirable or appropriate, must be approached with the utmost of caution. On this point there can be no compromises. It is for this reason that the delegates from the North America Region of the World Blind Union recently adopted a firm resolution requesting that the World Blind Union show leadership to the world so that priorities and issues that concern blind, deaf-blind and persons with poor or failing vision are, and must be, dealt with, in a distinct and unique manner.

It is out of this concern that blind and visually impaired individuals will not be well served by the generic approach; in fact there could be an adverse impact since "access" will mean ramps, but may not mean access to print for the non-seeing world. Dr. Jernigan and I, among others in this country and elsewhere, have strongly supported the development of the World Blind Union with the hope that it can be an international forum to balance, or, if necessary, oppose the generic approach to disability should such prove to be counter-productive in resolving our own issues and problems. In the United States, your organization, the National Federation of the Blind, and others such as the American Foundation for the Blind, can and must be out front to resist, where appropriate, any attempt on the part of any organization for the disabled that will not serve our interests, or falsely claim to speak on our behalf. Be aware that this is a far greater issue with potentially a significance beyond what we have fully understood to date. Within a broader and numerically larger disabled community we, as blind persons, must not allow ourselves either to become or to be viewed as the children of minor wives.

Whether viewed in the context of our life in today's society to include access to information, to employment, transportation, housing, leisure, and other services predicated on equality before the law, our goal must be to enjoy the status of the children of the primary wife.

Finally, and most important of all, we should not seek that status in our community, or within our own family, unless we first possess the confidence in ourselves as individuals. Self confident, we can develop the required ability and full measure of self-reliance to enjoy the status of the child of

the primary wife. Where, for whatever reason, our status is that of the child of the minor wife, we must seek the resources and the means to alter that status to first class citizenship with all that that implies.

To summarize, I have touched on the fundamental priorities relevant to equality and full participation within our society; the urgency and significance of a focused and concerted approach within the blindness movement; and to re-state the obvious, that self-esteem and self-confidence can and will flourish within a hospitable environment in a nation, whose citizens possess the attitudinal and behavioral prerequisites. It is for that reason that I consider it a privilege and an opportunity to have shared these few moments with you at this podium to congratulate you on your success, and urge that you redouble your efforts in order that blind people today, and in generations to come, will never know the status of Children of Minor Wives.